

## 2.2 ADDRESSING (UN)INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES OF SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES: CONCEPTUAL LESSONS FROM LUXEMBOURG'S REDANGE CANTON

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### Introduction

Current research on social innovation (SI) as it is being carried out in the projects SI-DRIVE<sup>1</sup> and TRANSIT<sup>2</sup>, for example, is looking at singular initiatives or SI networks and aims at conceptualizing their transformative impacts. The example of Redange, a rural canton in Luxembourg, shows how several initiatives that can be perceived as SIs are emerging in the same place. This makes it possible to investigate the relationships between SIs occurring in different societal sectors as well as understand transformations through the extended lens of sustainability across spaces. Further, the analysis of what motivates people to participate questions the assumption in SI research that communities of practice are intentional.

This paper presents aspects of an ongoing research project that addresses the heterogeneity of sustainability mindsets in (transformative) initiatives, which are perceived as social practices. It sets out with a brief overview of the key developments in Redange in the past 30 years. It then presents empiric findings of diverse motivations of practitioners and introduces aspects of the research design that addresses these motivations empirically with Q-methodology from a symbolic interactionist perspective. The paper puts into dialogue the research design and findings presented with current SI research.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.si-drive.eu/>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>

## The past 30 years of regional development

The Luxembourgish canton of Redange, comprising 10 municipalities with about 14.000 inhabitants, is the site of numerous initiatives aiming for resilience. These initiatives center around energy policies that began in the 1990's and early 2000's and gained international attention, as acknowledged by the European Village Renewal Award in 1996 and the European Solar Award in 2008.

### *Cooperation and participation in the 1980's*

Local protagonists trace the roots of today's sustainability initiatives back to the early 1980's, when community commissions proposing legislation to the community councils were opened for all of the electorates to participate. It is argued that these commissions provided space for social learning, as diverging interests were negotiated and coalitions of diverse stakeholders were forged.

Complementarily to the changes in policy-making within several municipalities, an inter-municipal syndicate was established in the early 1980's in order to bundle members' resources for addressing common needs. This allowed joint efforts to provide regional infrastructure such as a regional high school, a medical center and a public swimming pool. In contrast to the planning culture of Luxembourg (HESSE 2015), several planning projects have been implemented with the participation of prospective users and citizens. Architects and local politicians stated that the increase in costs as well as the lengthier implementation was rewarded with a high degree of citizen satisfaction and user-perceived ownership of the facilities.

### *Energy policies*

Policy-makers of the time highlight that the experience of deliberation, resolving conflict and establishing trust among people provided a foundation for the energy policies developed in the 1990's. When the national government planned a high-voltage grid through the region in order to satisfy the expected consumer needs in the future, a civic movement formed opposing this measure. The movement designed a strategy to reduce regional energy significantly while putting in place legislation and infrastructure to pursue the goal of energy autonomy. The *Klimabündnis*, an intermunicipal contract in which members committed to reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 10% every ten years, was forged by 6 communes. By now, it has been adopted by a third of Luxembourg's communes. Beckerich, a key commune in the regional energy transition, reduced CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 50% between 1995 and 2010. Whereas today about 90% of low voltage and 40% of heat demand are covered by renewables, Beckerich aims at achieving energy autonomy through renewables by 2020 (GIRA 2009).

In order to achieve these goals, a free-of-charge public energy consultancy with experts on energy efficiency and ecologically benign construction was established.

Domestic use of water and energy has been reduced significantly in the region, with domestic water use being 20% lower than the national average (CARR and DOERR 2014). Complementarily, infrastructure facilities such as biogas plants and district heating grids were put in place to regionalize the energy market and to shift towards a variety of renewable energy forms. It was not until a change in EU legislation in the early 2000's that opposition from Luxembourgish ministries against the decentralizing measures ceased. The tentative keystone of the energy transition will be a wind farm comprising 6 wind turbines, which will enable the region to satisfy its entire energy needs through regional renewable resources. In the course of this energy transition, regional clusters in the energy and construction sectors have emerged.

### ***Ecosystem governance***

Another progressive initiative that requires collaboration and a high conflict-solving capacity is the country's first intermunicipal and trans-border ecosystem governance scheme. Here, various stakeholders, including farmers, the forest industry as well as nature protection associations, and municipal administrations established an action plan to re-naturalize the ecosystem surrounding the river Attert. Today, this *contrat de rivière* is common practice in 5 other regions of the small country, although most agreements made in the 1990's are now regulated in the EU Water Framework and Habitats Directive.

### ***Branching out from the transformative spirit***

In 2012, an association supported by businesses, the municipal syndicate and the regional LEADER<sup>3</sup> office introduced the regional currency BEKI. The official aim is to retain generated value in the region and promote regional industries. To this day, the project is facing strong opposition from national media, government representatives and stakeholders from the finance and service sector. It is often interpreted as a breakaway initiative from the euro in a political economy that heavily relies on the finance and service industries and is home to several European institutions. Nonetheless, the circulation of the currency is accelerating, and the overall amount of BEKI increased five-fold between 2013 and 2016 up to about 200.000 (exchange rate 1 EUR = 1 BEKI). For the current LEADER period, a project application arguing for converting the BEKI into a crypto currency is pending in Luxembourgish ministries.

Unlike the regional currency, which was initially brought forward by a few individuals, the community-supported agriculture (CSA) scheme *van der Atert* is currently being established through initiatives of a municipal commission. The aim of the project is to establish a consumer cooperative to help farmers develop more environmentally benign practices and regional distribution. Regional cycles of production and consumption are actively forged, linking producers of resources, artisans and distributors. Another aim

<sup>3</sup> Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale.

of the project is to link these stakeholders to the regional currency in order to altogether increase the resilience of the regional food system and improve producer-consumer relations.

Finally, the transition town community of Luxembourg has established its national hub in the commune of Beckerich. The *Centre for Ecological Learning Luxembourg (CELL)* actively promotes transdisciplinary learning as well as sociocratic modes of deliberation and decision-making through several applied projects in the region.

## **(Un)intentional communities of sustainability practices?**

Regional development can be characterized from several angles that require different research paradigms. It is certain that the individual agency of key persons has been the catalyst for several initiatives. Nonetheless, all of the initiatives introduced above rely on the routinized integration of practices and knowledge of several actor groups in the region. In order to investigate these aspects of social learning, this paper introduces a social practice perspective and does not discuss matters of agency and power.

Looking at the evolution of initiatives in the region, it can be argued that they strengthen the relationships between diverse participants dispersed across the region. Further, they have radiated across fields of community and societal sectors, ranging from the energy, food, construction and financial systems to ecosystem governance. All of the initiatives mentioned above aim at increasing the region's resilience within the sectors they address and establish commons in the face of expected systemic challenges ahead.

Considering their partially critical reception by national media and the government as well as the increasing tensions in the regional political landscape, it can be argued that initiatives have become more progressive and emancipatory compared to the mainstream political culture in Luxembourg. Exploratory interviews with key stakeholders and local publications addressing policy tourists depict a progressive tendency put forward by a population that is increasingly united behind the goal of resilience and a rather vague discourse on sustainability.

In contrast, empiric data suggests a more disperse picture: Farmers who do not believe in global warming participate in a biogas coop for financial reasons. Businesses join the regional currency to increase profit, whereas the governing board's motivation seems to be driven by criticism directed at the current monetary system and global finance. House owners employ eco-construction businesses primarily in order to tap into subsidy schemes and not because they want to realize a more environmentally benign mode of living. These kinds of diverse and at times conflicting motivations and interests can be found within each regional initiative.

Yet, looking at the past 30 years of regional development, sustainability interventions and transformations in different systems of provision do occur, and almost all of them have become stable today. Interview data suggests that lines of conflict do not appear that much surrounding the contents or perceived ideologies behind the initiatives, but rather that they are based on common personal resentments. The initiatives seem to be carried out regardless of partially antagonistic motivations of their participants.

Empirical data further suggests an interrelation of these social initiatives in various ways: Several people are engaged in various initiatives simultaneously, social learning processes lead to reoccurring patterns in the forging and maintenance of social relations, and lately initiatives are becoming increasingly integrated by interlinking their constitutive practices, such as paying goods offered by the CSA in BEKI. Several practitioners and observers have furthermore identified relationships between the initiatives in terms of prefiguration, causation and also aversion.

Based on information gathered in over 50 interviews throughout different stages of the research project, it is possible to make the hypothesis that it is the ability to align diverse interests in practice that allows for the initiatives to emerge. This runs counter to the narrative of intentional groups of practitioners with homogeneous mindsets strategically closing loops in the chosen systems of provision. Furthermore, every protagonist interviewed highlighted that there is no distinct strategy or goal behind the respective emerging initiative. Participation and cooperation were driven by intuition, deliberation and “learning on the go”.

To sum up, the data suggests a strong diversity in *social perspectives* in the initiatives. When asked about motivations to participate, beliefs and experiences, the interviewees gave at times diverging answers. Furthermore, they emphasized strong relations among the initiatives (“the regional currency would never have been possible without a successful energy transition”), but when asked to elaborate on these relations, they struggled to do so.

This opens up two trajectories of analysis:

- A) to identify heterogeneous social perspectives within chosen initiatives;
- B) to analyze patterns of emergence and ongoing construction of these initiatives.

The following section will introduce parts of the research design that addresses trajectory A) as it was presented at the ARL summer school in Vienna in 2017.

## Translating site ontology and symbolic interactionism into research practice

Regarding the diversity and flux of social perspectives in the initiatives, it seems adequate to assume the existence of multiple, continuous and infinite perceptions of reality within and among individuals. It can further be assumed that people constantly synchronize their perceptions amongst each other to a degree of congruence that suffices for continuous symbolic interaction in social practices. When conducting activities, people can, to a degree, rely on what others intend to do and how they will do it. Through this relativist approach, which is rooted in pragmatism (JOAS 1992) and symbolic interactionism (BLUMER 1969; MEAD 1998), a version of reality of the regional development is co-constructed with local people. Consequently, the study takes a constructivist approach and applies a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology (DENZIN and LINCOLN 2013).

### *A symbolic interaction perspective on site ontology*

The local development since the 1980's is perceived as a process of social learning (REED et al. 2010): New participatory forms of local decision-making, modes of consensus-finding as well as conflict-solving and deliberation are continuously developed and (re)integrated into practices. These allow for a deeper learning process affecting participants' value systems. Awareness on interrelated systemic challenges such as loss of biodiversity, social fragmentation and economic dependence has emerged. However, to what extent this is due to regional initiatives or to higher-level media can hardly be determined.

Nevertheless, all initiatives share a transversal pattern of emergence: Protagonists are inspired by initiatives they learned about in other places, they form work groups to do excursions for educational purposes and invite practitioners from other places. However, research suggests that this should not be considered mere policy import or imitation, but rather inspiration and careful adaption to the regional context (PECK and THEODORE 2010).

According to SCHATZKI (2013; 2015), initiatives are understood as new arrangements and alterations of existing practices forged to make qualitatively novel constellations of *practice arrangement bundles* (PABs) by communities of practice (not the executive, technocratic kind conceptualized by Etienne WENGER). The *social phenomenon* of regional development, or transformation in distinct fields of community (SOMMER and WELZER 2014), is understood to emerge through the interplay of these PABs. Considering early writings of SCHATZKI (2003) that draw on symbolic interactionism, one can assume that the PABs are held together by *general understandings* (generally held beliefs, values, perceptions of higher-order institutions) of which the participants merely possess individual versions, called *mental states*. SCHATZKI argues that these need

to overlap to a certain extent in order to enable ongoing communication and interaction. In the following section, in order to facilitate communication between theory and methodology and due to the ambiguity of the concept in SCHATZKI's own writings, these mental states are referred to as *social perspectives*.

### ***Distilling social perspectives with the Q-method***

In order to describe the diverse social perspectives within the initiatives and analyze the modes of their deliberation in practice, 5 initiatives were chosen for an in-depth analysis: A biogas cooperative, a water governance scheme, an intercommunal energy consultancy (Energieatelier), a CSA project and the regional currency.

Following the social practice theory approach chosen for this analysis, the mental states of the participants are perceived as *operant subjectivities* (BROWN 1980). The heterogeneous perspectives within the chosen initiatives are addressed by *Q-methodological* research (WATTS and STENNER 2012; WEBLER and TULER 2002). For this purpose, tests are performed within each initiative in order to generate 3-4 social perspectives around the broad guiding question of *Why do people participate?* These are then introduced to focus groups within the initiatives.

## **Tentative *Leitbilder* of regional development**

In order to compare the initiatives, an analytical framework with the categories of motivations, experiences and beliefs has been developed. This framework was inspired by the *Leitbildanalyse* developed by de HAAN et al. 2000 (also GIESEL 2007) to explore motifs and experiences of participants in local Agenda 21 projects. It has been altered as a reaction to significant categories emerging in vivo from qualitative data in qualitative data analysis test runs. The final categories that focus on the social perspective within the initiatives are more specific:

- Future projections (economic, ecological, social and cultural)
- Internal/External factors of group (de-)synchronization
- Self-referential motifs
- Knowledge & learning

These categories served as codes for analyzing the exploratory interviews with key stakeholders from each initiative. In this way, natural statements from the transcripts were chosen as items for the Q-study. Factor analyses of the Q-sorts with the respective initiatives then enabled characterizing the social perspectives within the initiatives following the natural statements.

## Dialogue with recent (Transformative) SI research

The research project has several similarities with (T) SI research, especially with the SI-DRIVE project (HOWALDT and SCHWARZ 2016), the TRANSIT project (HAXELTINE et al. 2016) and with concepts proposed by MOULAERT et al. (2013): It employs a relational approach to investigate the affects of initiatives aiming towards more socially and environmentally benign ways of being in a community. Perceived as SIs, the study is interested in how these are framed, in their meanings, how they are identified (research trajectory A) as well as their modes of organizing (research trajectory B) (CHILVERS and LONGHURST 2014).

Regarding ontological assumptions, the research strands mentioned above partially take a practice theory approach. However, even though they address the dialectic relationship between structure and agency, TRANSIT and SI-DRIVE focus on a social practice approach concerned with everyday routines (e.g. SHOVE, PANTZAR, and WATSON 2012), rather than on the site ontology proposed by Schatzki. The latter, as argued above, seems more practicable for introducing aspects of institutionalization and structuration in larger practice communities.

The symbolic interactionist approach of the project presented in this regard arguably addresses a gap in SI research, as it challenges the assumption of intentional communities of practice carrying out SIs. Further, the geographic perspective as provided by site ontology makes it possible to investigate relations amongst various SIs occurring in the same place. In this regard, conceptualizing the aspects of diffusion and adoption of practices from other places with literature on policy mobility instead of Tarde's theory of imitation allows for a greater awareness of the spatial context.

The potential of initiatives, perceived as SIs, to affect local institutions and therefore cause or prefigure SI in other sectors, such as the energy, agriculture or finance sectors, could be a way to perceive their effects on elusive matters such as social change or transformation differently. A geographic lens makes it possible to analyze transformation in various societal sectors in their spatial extension, from the level of communes to the canton and the nation-state (WRIGHT 2010). In this regard, BRAUNTHÜRMANN and JOHN'S (2010) suggestion to perceive SIs not as triggers, but as markers of institutional change bears intriguing interpretative potential.



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